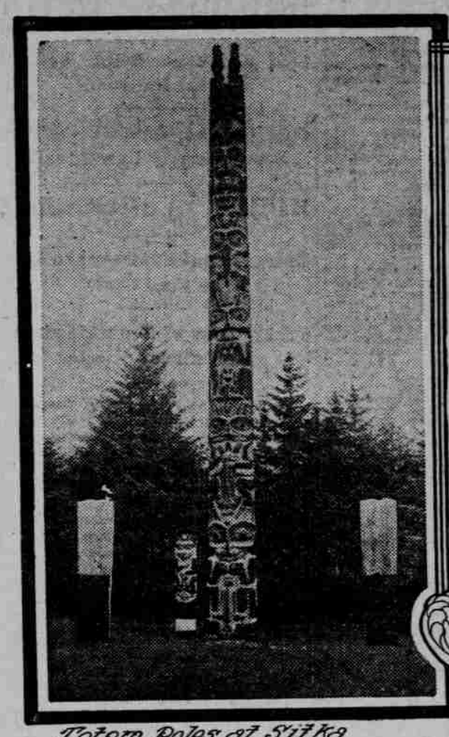
The Totem Poles of Alaska

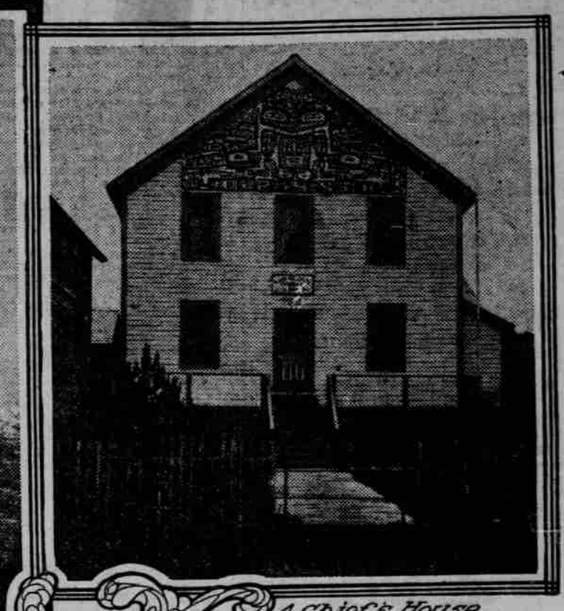
By K L Smith

Chief Kateshaus' Totem, Wrangel, Alaska

Totem Poles in Alaskan Deserted Village



Totem Poles at Sitka



A Chief's House in Sitka. Totem on Front

PRESIDENT TAFT'S recent announcement that in his opinion Alaska is not ready for a form of self-government has occasioned much comment pro and con in the West, where some Alaskans go so far as to assert that he has been misinformed regarding conditions in that country. Politics in Alaska are a much-mooted theme, and for sometime the majority of the inhabitants have been clamoring for a territorial representation, that the people be allowed to manage their own affairs, like those in the territories of the United States.

The President's opinion is that the country is still in a formative condition, largely of a floating population, and for this reason and others it would be unwise to make changes. His knowledge of the Philippines and other dependencies ought to aid him in arriving at a wise decision, but the self-government advocates, and it is said that 70 per cent. of Alaska's white population are, contend that there is no proper mine inspection; some of the officials are incapable, and that Congress is too much occupied with its own affairs in Washington to keep informed regarding a country so far away. The only way Alaskans can express an opinion now is in the election of a territorial delegate to Congress, and he may not vote.

Whether Alaska gets a territorial form of government or not at present it is bound to come, for this country is gaining a good class of white people. The gold deposits, especially in the northwestern part, have been merely touched, and the southern part has the largest coal and copper fields in the world, besides the extensive fisheries. The coast is already known as a pleasure ground for tourists.

Though the business of Alaska is carried on by the white man, there is a fair size native population, peaceful Indians, who work with the white, while still cherishing many old superstitions, such as in regard to their totem poles. Since the enterprising citizens of Seattle brought back a totem pole from Alaska and placed it in their public square many persons have been interested in these heraldric insignia which the Indians cherish with pride. Many of the Indian tribes have selected the shores of the mainland of Alaska for their abodes, and their fondness for the water has earned them the title of Venetians of America. The totem poles in these villages are worth going many miles to see, especially those on the streets of Wrangel, Ketchikan, Tongas, Killisnoo and Kasaan.

In reality, the legends which the totems illustrate are nursery tales and traditions interwoven with heraldric designs. Few white people know their history, but Father Duncan, a missionary to these Indians for 50 years, has gained what is supposed to be the true story of the Alaskan totems. According to his version, ages ago the Indians adopted these crests, or totems, to distinguish the four social clans into which their races are divided. These were the Kish-pootwadda, who have for symbol the fin-back whale in the sea, the grizzly bear on land, the grouse in the air and the sun and stars; the Cannada, who take the frog, raven, star-fish and bullhead; the Lach-kboo, who adopt the heron and grizzly bear for totems, and the Lackshkeak, who use the eagle, beaver and halibut. A single system will extend among all the principal tribes, as the Haida, whose totems show eagle, crow, wolf or bear.

Totem poles, erected before Indian dwellings, are frequently a history of the family itself, capped by the traditional beast or bird. For instance, a bear may top a pole, and from there down the pole may show grotesque carvings, illustrating for what the family is noted. Whatever the animal on the top, it is a visible sign of Indian mythology, and all who are entitled to this insignia are considered blood-relations. An Indian might come from the ends of the earth, and if he could show that he was entitled to a crow on his totem, he would be received with open arms by all of the clan having this escutcheon.

When Father Duncan asked the Indians to explain how this idea originated, they said that years ago their ancestors lived in a beautiful land, where the mythological animals proclaimed themselves as heads of the various families. Later came a flood that destroyed nearly everything, and when the waters subsided the few remaining Indians settled on the land and formed new relations. They still retained their heraldric symbols, and to the flood they attribute the fact that the tribe may be widely separated. These crests or totems are applied to many things, and often undergo various changes. When an Indian becomes wealthy he may adopt a more pretentious totem, and often this is carved on his household utensils and canoes, and on the death of a head of a family a totem pole may be erected in front of his successor.

A prominent use to which totems are put is to prevent intermarriages between persons of the same clans. For instance, a whale cannot marry a whale or a frog a frog, nor can a bear marry a beaver, for they are both carnivorous. Another curious thing about a totem is that they often suggest names for children. Thus, Wee-way-ach means Big Whale, and Lee-tahm-lach-taon means Sitting on Ice or Eagle. These children take their mother's crest, and as a consequence an Indian's heir is his sister's son, and if a woman marries into a distant tribe, her children leave when grown and return to their mother's people. It makes quite a complicated system, but the Alaskan Indians understand it, though it puzzles the white man. It is a peculiar fact that few totems are found north of Sitka or on the mainland, but in every village persons can buy miniature totems which the natives carve for sale.

When one can get an Indian to tell the history of his totem, he makes a good story out of it. A widely known totem is the bear totem of Wrangel, and in a side street in Ketchikan is the Kyam totem. Another queer totem in Ketchikan has a coat and cap nailed to it. This totem was erected in memory of an early Hudson Bay explorer by his wife. While in command of a ship he married an Indian girl, and after his death his widow had this pole erected. It is surmounted by an eagle, which shows the insignia of the wife's tribe, and below are many carvings to tell her husband's history. The coat and cap are added touches not usually found on totem poles. The strangest totem in Alaska is, however, further north, and is carved to represent the head of a white man, with white face and long beard. The Indians say that long ago a chief's wife left her home to go fishing. On her return her children had disappeared, and though she sought for them, she never found them. As the crows mocked her from the trees she felt sure that a white trader had stolen them, and so a totem pole was erected in their memory. The face with the beard represents the "Boston" man, and the figures show the children that he stole.

All these totem poles are from 20 to 60 feet high and from 2 to 5 feet in diameter. The carving is in front, while the rear part is hollowed out to make it light in weight. In some of the totems of the Haidas a doorway was cut through the back of the tree to allow egress and ingress. Many dwellings have two totem poles, one representing the male side and the other the female side of the house. One totem is plain except that it holds on the top the image of a bear. The sides are carved with the footprints of the animal, who evidently scrambled considerably to get to the top of his pole. The Haida Indians are noted for their skill in carving and they make remarkable slate modelings that compare favorably with the work of civilized sculptors. They are fond of carving the bear, for it is the totem of their tribe and represents the story of a young Indian maiden who laughed at the bears when she was in the woods. All of a sudden innumerable bears appeared and killed all her comrades, the chief reserving her for a wife. From this union there sprang a child, half human and half bear. One day the Indians saw this strange creature up a tree and urged it to dwell with them. She became the ancestor of all Indians entitled to the bear crest.

Totems are often displayed over the doors of famous Alaskan chiefs, where they serve as door plates, and they are seen on cooking utensils. A famous chief in Killisnoo, Chief Jake, had his totem carved on the front of his house, together with a jingle, setting forth his claims to sovereignty. This old man was taken to California as a hostage and ever afterward added to his chief's regalia 10 or 12 policemen's stars and a tall silk hat.

But the graveyard at Kasaan is still more wonderful, for here are strange Indian graves, some boxed in, other fenced around, still others inclosed in elaborate summer houses, and on each grave or on top of the summer house is a totem pole or carved figure of some animal, which is often painted blue or red. These totems are always placed over the grave of a chief or shaman (medicine man), and as it is the ambition of the Indians to make a showing with their totems the carved image in the cemetery is often more elaborate than before the house. There are other Indian totem villages as strange as Kasaan, but as this is accessible to the Alaskan voyager there is a movement to petition the United States government to preserve it as a curiosity. The Indians seldom destroy or part with a totem. When necessity makes an Indian sell his ancestral pole, he asks $2,000 or more for it, for he says that it has required generations to carve it and he is parting with what to him is the same as a door plate or a Scotch plaid. Some persons think they are worshiped as gods, but this is a mistake. The totems are no more worshiped than escutcheons or Masonic emblems.

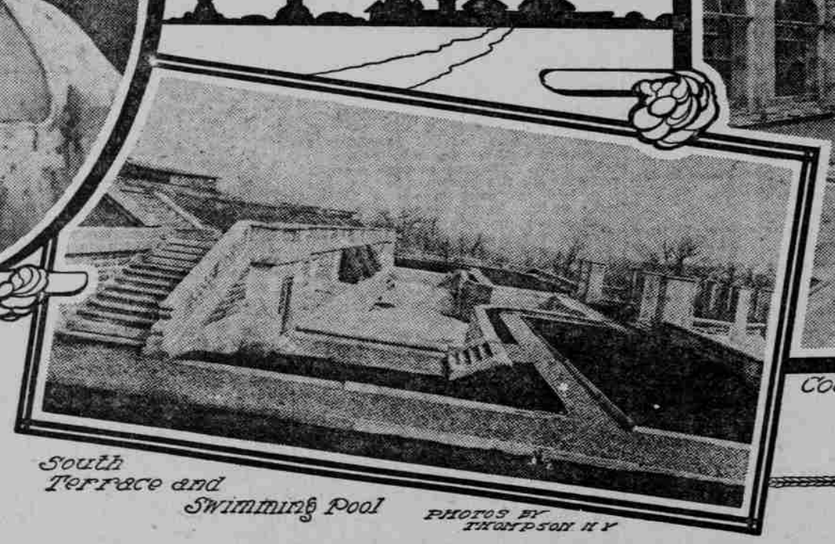
These same Alaskan Indians have potlatches, at which gifts are given away to the guests. Potlatch is the Chinook word for gift, and the invitations to the feast are issued several days in advance of the entertainment. An hour or so before the party begins, a messenger is sent forth to ring a bell to notify the guests that the feast is about to begin. Each person brings a pan and a cup for coffee and is expected to wear the gaudiest blankets his hut affords. When the Indians, with faces painted and eyebrows blackened, appear, the meal begins. It consists of pilot bread, apples, coffee and candy and is partaken of while the guests sit on the floor. Everyone fills his bowl and toasts are given, followed by dancing.

The distribution of gifts is the crowning feature of the occasion. Each host aims to give away more than his neighbor, and blankets are distributed by the hundreds. Sometimes the Indian giving the party mounts on his roof and throws the gifts to his guests. He hopes not only to gain a reputation for liberality, but he thinks that if he gives enough he may one day be elected chief. Rolls of cotton, flour and blankets are thrown. There have been potlatches where blankets were piled high and then burned or torn into strips, as the Indians are reckless in their revelry and extravagant with their belongings. Many an Indian has been ruined for life by his potlatch and the frenzied dancing that ends the evening. Potlatch prodigality has been so detrimental that the whites have tried to stop these orgies, but occasional ceremonies are held with barbaric splendor, and when they take place invitations are sought by the white man, who desires to witness one of the most remarkable exhibitions connected with Indian life. Alaska is a storehouse of wonders, not the least of which are its totem poles and potlatches.

TOWER HILL

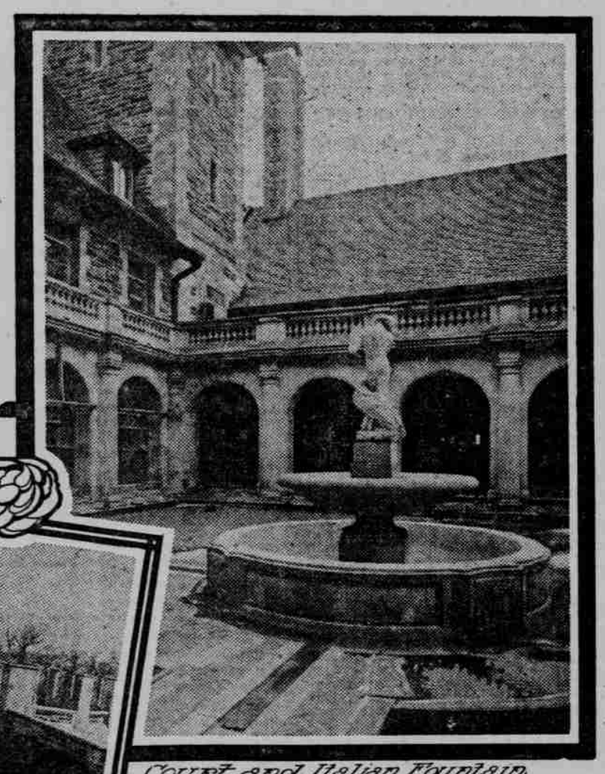
THE MOST MAGNIFICENT ESTATE IN AMERICA

Mrs. Edward H. Harriman From her Most Recent Portrait by Bairu van Krumbaar



South Terrace and Swimming Pool

PHOTOS BY THOMPSON N Y



Court and Italian Fountain

Side View of Tower Hill

MRS. EDWARD H. HARRIMAN has been acclaimed the richest woman in the world. The vast fortune left by Mr. Harriman, the "emperor of railroads," has been variously estimated at anywhere from $100,000,000 to $300,000,000, and it is but natural that her palatial estate, Tower Hill, should be the most magnificent in America.

Nestled on the very crest of the Ramapo mountains, in Orange county, N. Y., Tower Hill is to the villages of Arden and Turners and the surrounding hamlets what the baronial estates of some English landed proprietors are to his tenantry. In fact, these villages and hamlets were all included in the lavish purchase of land made by Mr. Harriman years ago, when he first dreamed of establishing his magnificent country estate in these beautiful hills, and nearly all the people are his tenants or employes. The house overlooks a tract of 50,000 square acres of the most beautiful rolling and wooded country in the Empire State. From its broad terraces, porticos and facades, every inch of this tract can be seen. Its view is unparalleled in this part of the world, and when orders for the construction of the house proper were given it was with the understanding that not a tree that could be saved should be sacrificed. His wishes were observed to the letter, and the very density of the forests and the wildness of the scenery as one approaches the estate is its chief charm.

When Mr. Harriman first discussed the plans of his home with his architects he said: "I don't want one of those highly ornamental foreign-looking houses. Instead, I want a plain, comfortable, straightforward American home."

Accordingly, no European style or historic architectural period was adhered to in its designing. The house is built entirely of huge blue granite blocks, quarried from the adjacent hills. The interior woodwork to a great extent was turned and carved in Mr. Harriman's own turning mill, from his own oak, pine and chestnut trees, and the work was done by the same simple and plain Orange county folk who have been Mr. Harriman's neighbors for the past quarter century. There is nothing artificial in this home, inside or out. It is practical, roomy, comfortable and beautiful throughout.

Alighting from a train at Turners, one gets his first glimpse of Tower Hill, perched way up on the top of the mountain. True, only the slate roof and the tiling of the mansion can be seen at this distance, but even from there one immediately gets the idea that as the distance to the house lessens, there will soon burst into view a mansion of stately proportions and unusual beauty. The house is a measured mile from the station, and yet it towers 800 feet above the railroad tracks, or 1,300 feet above the sea level. On all sides stretch densely wooded forests, pretty valleys, mirrored lakes and rippling streams, all of which have come into Mr. Harriman's possession within the past 25 years.

One way, and quite the easiest, of approach to Tower Hill, provided the visitor is not motoring, is by the incline fitted with a steam windlass which draws a cable car up and down. At the top of this incline is a broad terrace over which winds a magnificent driveway, flanked by a high, substantial wall of blue granite. The house is only partially discernible from this approach, and it is not until the roadway has been traversed that the visitor gains an unobstructed view of the mansion. Then a central courtyard is reached in the center of which a highly ornamental fountain splashes and the variegated flower beds abound, while cool and shady arcades stretch from the court. From this vantage point can be seen for the first time the big, rambling eastern wing where the 35 servants have their quarters.

The illustrations here given supply the reader with a good idea of the exterior of the Harriman mansion, so in this article we will mainly treat of the interior of this palatial "summer" home. Upon entering the main hall of Tower Hill the visitor finds himself in a lofty and commodious apartment, 30 by 60 feet, and wainscoted in quartered oak to a height of 40 feet. A warm buff-colored stone furnishes the ornamentation above the wainscoting, and the effect is pleasing and novel. This buff stone came to the attention of Mr. Harriman while he was traveling through Utah, and he was so pleased with it that he used it throughout the mansion.

Heavy and richly carved oak trusses form the ceiling to the entrance hall, and the floor is of marble. At the farther end of the hall is a gallery in which has been installed an electrical aeolian which, it is said, can reproduce the tones of every known musical instrument. Few knew it, but music amounted to a passion with Mr. Harriman. A long corridor stretches from this hall to the east and leads to a reception-room, where afternoon tea is served to the members of the Harriman family and their guests. The woodwork of this room is in lighter tones and proportions. Opening off the same corridor and to the south are the house loggia, dining-room and main living-room. Hazelwood is employed in the decoration of the living-room, all four sides and the ceiling being richly panelled. The heavier and darker woodwork of the dining-room is bordered with light green marble, and the effect is novel and imposing. The mantel in this room is also of green marble, but many shades have been employed in its embellishment. The windows of the dining-room overlook a beautifully grassed court, and Arden is in plain view. The view, extending 20 miles over the hills and down the valleys, is one of the most charming obtainable at Tower Hill. The loggia is in the southwest corner of the first floor, and its south wall is pierced with five big arches which stretch towards the hilltops. In winter these arches will be fitted with glass casements, thus converting it into a big, bright and warm sun parlor. Another loggia has been constructed just beyond the dining-room's casement windows, and here in warm weather and on bright days the family will dine. Adjoining the dining-room is the butler's pantry, a large, roomy apartment, provided with glass shelving throughout and tiled from the terrazo floor to the ceiling.

The house is heated by hot water, while the refrigerating plant cools several rooms in the cellar used as storerooms and provides an even, low temperature for the refrigerator in the butler's pantry. The 35 rooms for the servants, all with high ceilings, warm, bright and sunny, are in the wing reached through the kitchen, and there every convenience that might add to the comfort of the household's servitors has been installed.

The second floor of the main building is given over to sleeping apartments for the family. In designing this house Mr. Harriman's love for open fires was fully gratified and every bedchamber is provided with a fireplace upon which big logs burn. There is even a fireplace in the private bathroom which was intended for the head of the house, and this room incidentally is one of the most modern in equipment in the world. Every device ever seen, and many that are new, have been included. One of the last commissions the architects received from Mr. Harriman prior to his death had to do with this bathroom. While in Europe he wrote his architect telling him he wanted an open fireplace in this room. The architect demurred, and after writing Mr. Harriman his views on the subject, he received a letter from the master of Tower Hill, in which was enclosed a humorous sketch. Mr. Harriman showed how it would be possible to build the fireplace, and then sketched a figure, supposed to be him, reaching across the room for an object which he labeled "sponge."

No expense has been spared in fitting out the large, sunny apartment at the southeast corner of the third floor. This is Miss Mary Harriman's private library, and no young woman in America has so truly a regal apartment in which to lounge and seclude herself from prying eyes. The room is wainscoted in American white oak, and the handcarving there found represents many months of hard work on the part of several of the most skilled wood carvers in the United States. A white marble fireplace is set into the mantel, and on all four sides of this charming room stand richly carved white oak shelves, filled with Miss Harriman's favorite authors, nearly all of which are editions de luxe. The four big casement windows overlook a chain of beautiful lakes and the swimming pool off to the side of the main terrace.

In the east wing of the third floor are the apartments of the two Harriman boys. Each has a sleeping and sitting room and a bath. There is no playroom for these youngsters, such as billiard-room, cardroom or bowling alleys, for Mr. Harriman intended them from the first to be outdoor boys, and this they are in the strictest sense. Their playground is a two-acre lot, blasted from solid rock. The scrub oaks that covered the field have been grubbed up, a subsoil provided and a beautiful lawn cultivated over this hitherto barren waste. Here they play racquets and tennis, and such other sports as they care to indulge in.

The name of the Harriman home was suggested by the immense steel tower several hundred yards to the north of the house, from whose dizzy heights the family claim they can command an uninterrupted view of the surrounding country for a distance of 40 miles. Still another tower adorns the roof of the house proper, and this, too, commands a sweeping view of Ramapo Hills. This tower is reached by a private hall and stairway, which the family humorously refer to as the "secret stair."

Tower Hill, as magnificent as it is, is yet in an embryo state, but when completed, and Mrs. Harriman declares this will be done exactly as her husband planned, it will be one of the most magnificent estates in the world.